

ANYTHING LIKE US

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Anything Like Us is a collection of poems with a critical introduction. In this introduction, I explore modern alternatives to Romantic and Neo-Romantic lyric expression. I conclude that a contemporary lyric that desires to be, in some fashion, about itself, must exhibit an acceptance of the mediating influences of time and language, while cultivating an inter-subjective point-of-view that does not insist too much on the authority of a single, coherent voice. The poems in Anything Like Us reflect, in both form and content, many of the conclusions advanced in the introduction. Nearly all the poems concern the desire for, and failure to find, meaningful connections in an uncertain world

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
PREFACE	1
WORKS CITED	22
POEMS	
The Descent	24
PART ONE	
Hearse	26
PART TWO	
Marigolds	39
How Memory Works	40
Chopin	42
Carlotta's Fire	43
The Natural World	44
Sixty Second Spot	45
The Death of Cleopatra	46
Lucky Day	48
Fiddler on the Roof	49
Lysippan Proportions	50
In an Occupied Land	51
PART THREE	
Notes for an Invitation	53
The Rumor Mill	55
The Samson Chronicles	56
Occasional Hats	57
Mortuary Fish	60
The Poet (mid-career)	61
From the Stamp Collection of P. Monk	63
Dancing with the Rack	64

Parable of the Box	65
A Few Notes on the Poem to Follow	66
Tooly's Regards	67
PART FOUR	
In the Canyon of Forgotten Makers	69

PREFACE TO THE POEMS

Lyric poetry, as its name implies, has its roots in song. It is no surprise, then, that the lyric is often (rightly) associated with qualities of musicality, intensity and concision. While these qualities have remained fairly constant markers of lyric expression, other aspects of lyric have tended to shift according to the social, political and/or aesthetic climate in which the lyric was produced. Critic Jeffrey Walker notes, for example, that in the first century BC, lyric was primarily a didactic, persuasive mode of oration “directed toward the establishment, reconfirmation, or revision of general values and beliefs” (27). Alternatively, in the Renaissance “Aristotelianism forced a mimetic literary model on all genres and modes,” and lyric became a vehicle for brief “apostrophic fragments implicitly excerpted from a larger drama” (Jeffreys, “Introduction” xiii). By the dawn of the Romantic era, lyric had become dissociated from the narrative and discursive forms that once were its primary domain (Walker 39). It is with this uniquely Romantic strain of lyric that I would like to begin, for it is this form, variously altered but essentially consistent, that persists even today as the dominant lyric mode in contemporary poetry.

The modern, Neo-Romantic lyric is, according to poet Charles Simic, “the place where the individual asserts himself or herself against the gods and demons of history and the tribe” (118). Implicit in this statement are several assumptions that I would like to explore in the context of a brief examination of lyric invention. The primary assumption is that the lyric is a medium for the genuine expression of an authentic self, a self that is “stable, autonomous, and coherent” (Cummings 154). This assertion, in turn, implies that the self can and must be defined in opposition to forces that would complicate, or even

destroy, its transcendent autonomy—in this case the forces of time, of language, and of a greater, more diverse community, what Simic calls “the tribe.”

The typical lyric poem, then, attempts a retreat into pure subjectivity, a poetic ground from which the “other” can be either assimilated or repelled. According to critic Tilottama Rajan, “[l]yric consciousness . . . comes as close as possible to approximating what Sartre calls a ‘shut imaginary consciousness,’ a consciousness without the dimension of being-in-the-world” (196). If indeed this is the case, we are then left with the question of how lyric poets might attempt, within their poems, to deal with the mediating forces that threaten the purity of their subjectivity. As we shall see, most lyric poets ultimately turn to one of two basic strategies: they either a) employ intensely scenic language in order to affirm both the authority of the poem’s voice and the permanence of the scene itself, while simultaneously annihilating—sometimes via assimilation—difference; or b) engage the poem’s medium in an attempt to explore and acknowledge the limitations placed on self-expression by language, community and temporality. My view, as I will make clear, is that the former position constitutes a naïve denial of simple realities, while the latter position provides equal opportunities for beauty and expression, without damaging the poem’s moral ecology.

I would like first to examine the ways in which time and community (as expressed via language) may be seen as threats to the formation and maintenance of an authoritative, centered lyric self. In his essay from the *American Poetry Review*, entitled “Obscenery,” the poet Joe Wenderoth redefines the common expression “good-bye” in order to examine the speaker’s relationship to his or her temporal and relational surroundings. Wenderoth sees “good-bye” as the perfect expression of the lyric speaker’s dual

predicament. In the “good” half of the conjunction—the half that represents the traditionally Romantic view of lyric—

the world is the *same* world, at bottom, that we have known before, and that sameness is secure so long as the specifics through which we have secured it remain in place. The good is our *basking* in this certain specificity—a basking with no end to itself in sight. (30)

When, however, the eroding forces of time intrude, as they surely will, the second half of the conjunction becomes primary: “And *bye* begins to bring this basking to an end. With ‘bye,’ we are already situated within the inevitability of the leaving and upon our way to the nowhere it has held so long in store” (30).

Here, then, we can see, via Wenderoth’s metaphor, how time (“bye”) constantly threatens the centered position (“good”) in which the self defines itself and from which it speaks. Thus, the lyric self, as Simic suggests, must attempt to define itself by way of resistance, by asserting its own *timelessness*. This ability to step outside of time—or to live inside non-linear “spots of time”—provides an opportunity for the kind of Romantic meditation that solidifies the speaker’s centrality; the world—past, present and future—can be summoned, collected, examined, and revealed, all from the speaker’s stationary, solitary perch high above the world’s ruins. As Georges Poulet has observed, in the Romantic lyric, all notions of linearity dissolve, and “duration is not successive, but permanent” (qtd. in Cameron 211). If, however, the speaker is unable or unwilling to remove himself or herself from the stream of time, the speaker’s privileged position is endangered, since that position is ever passing into a state that cannot be maintained, can

only be desired from a specific point that, by nature of its specificity, is itself becoming lost.

Here, then, are the two sides of a question the contemporary lyric poet¹ must confront: is the position of the speaker stable and timeless or transient and constantly dissolving? This question is particularly thorny in an age wherein we are keenly aware of the mediating, externalizing influence of the poem's medium. While it may (though I rather doubt it) be possible to remove experience from time through a process of subjective internalization, once that internalized reality is expressed in language, it is objectified by its own mechanism. In referring to what she calls "the temporal contradiction at the heart of lyric," Sharon Cameron observes, "language is the most painful reminder of temporality, as it struggles to relate one thing at a time . . . [and] teaches us to tell the very differences it has worked so hard to dispel." Likewise, lyric speech desires to "slow time even as it is caught up in the momentum of temporal advance" (210). The forward-lurching linearity of language constantly thwarts the lyric's atemporal assertions, rendering them "no more than a hypothesis which the very process of expression inevitably dismantles" (Rajan 198). It would seem, then, that lyric poets must choose whether or not to acknowledge, within their poems, this central irony, which, regardless of recognition, nevertheless persists.

Later on, we will look at specific examples of poets who have tried to deal with

¹ I say "contemporary" because it seems only fair to judge the poetic philosophy of an age on its own terms. As Marjorie Perloff points out, "Wordsworth and Blake are writing at a moment in history when the individual was held to be unique" ("Response" 250) and language was assumed to be a transparent signifier of pre-linguistic realities, rather than a self-reflexive material medium that constructs its own, and our own, reality. Thus, while I may criticize the attenuated, Neo-Romantic lyric of the late twentieth century, I am not criticizing Romanticism as a historical movement.

the problem of lyric time. First, however, we must address the second threat to the lyric speaker's expression of a central self—a self that finds its linguistic home within the first-person *I*. The autonomy of the *I* is important to the speaker because, as with the atemporal, it allows him or her to distinguish self from other, to define the self “against,” as Simic notes, the larger entity of “the tribe.” From this position, the speaker's subjectivity becomes primary, a source of authority for the self and, in turn, for the poem. Moreover, the *I*'s medium for expression, language, becomes a “voice,” a way of speaking/singing that certifies the genuine identity and individuality of the vocalizer. There is a kind of safety in this autotelic individuality, in speaking from a place that is contained only in, and controlled only by, the self. This safety is shared by the readers, too, for while we are invited into the speaker's presence, his or her radiant individuality removes us to the realm of other, to the role of watchers, safe behind a paper-thin transparency.² Thus removed, we are ourselves given the gift of objectivity; though the autonomy of the genuine (subjective) voice is itself unquestionable, we can nevertheless feel the weight of the poem's meditation and, as with any apt illustration, apply it to our own lives.

Given the position of privilege and safety that is accorded by the autonomy of the self via its simultaneous expression *as voice*, it should not surprise us that any challenge to that autonomy will be viewed as a threat to lyric self's very existence. As Dorothy Neilsen points out, since the lyric “purports to encapsulate the experience of an ‘I,’ it relies on the repression of the ‘not-I’” (130). Whereas narrative and dramatic forms of

² It is from this position, for instance, that poet and *Village Voice* critic David Leavitt is able to blurb Sharon Olds' work by saying: “Her best work exhibits a lyrical acuity which is both purifying and redemptive. She sees description as a means of catharsis, and the result is impossible to forget . . . Sharon Olds is enormously self-aware; her poetry is remarkable for its candor, its eroticism, and its power to move” (qtd. in Olds, jacket).

poetry “present the self in interaction with other characters and events . . . lyric, as a purely subjective form, is marked by the exclusion of the other” (Rajan 196). In short, if the I is not defined in opposition to “the tribe,” it cannot be a vehicle for the authority of the self. Indeed, this is in essence the view of those who would argue that “self-expression” is a something akin to a contradiction in terms. While many may associate this contrary view with constructivist, postmodern thinking—that of the Language poets, for example—anxiety concerning the subjectivity of the speaker can be seen in earlier movements as well. Charles Olsen’s “Projectivist” poetics is largely based on a rejection of transcendent lyric subjectivity. Likewise, Antonio Machado, in his *Notes on Poetry*, raises two “problems of the lyric” which specifically call into question the speaker’s authority and autonomy. First, Machado asserts that every expression of the I implies “collaboration” with a You, since feelings themselves are intrinsically relational. For a heart to feel terror, it “requires the anguish of other hearts caught in the middle of a natural world not fully understood. . . . My feeling, in sum, is not exclusively mine, but rather *ours*” (167-8). If so, then the autonomous self becomes less so, while the possibility of a more various, “tribal” identity begins to take shape. This observation is bolstered by Machado’s second observation:

[I]n order to express my feelings I have language. But language is already much *less mine* than are my feelings. For after all I have had to acquire it, learn it from others. Before being *ours*—because it will never be *mine* alone—it was theirs; it belonged to the world which is neither subjective nor objective, to that third world . . . the world of *other I’s*. (168)

Machado here is conceding that what we often mistake for the authentic, singular voice of self-expression is, in fact, a polyphony constructed not by an individual, but by a larger culture. Such a view does not necessarily deny that an authentic self exists, just that the *genuine expression* of that self in language is only an approximation, since the terms and usage of that expression have not been created by the individual, but by the community, the society, the tribe. There can be, then, neither pure subjectivity nor absolute objectivity; instead, we are left with a hybrid in which the self and the other intermingle (without dissolving) in a fluid exchange.

Having now observed, via theory, some of the “problems” faced by writers of lyric poems, it might be helpful to look at an actual example of a contemporary, Neo-Romantic lyric. As I noted above, one of the chief ways by which lyric poets seek to control poetic space is by stepping outside of time. This suspension, assuming for a moment that it is possible, allows the poet to gain control of the scene; like a scientist with a dragonfly pinned to a board, the poet can then begin the process of taxonomy, selecting, describing and naming each piece of the scene with a luminous specificity that is itself a testament to the scene’s permanence. The speaker is thereby able to take possession of the subject, to own it and to deliver it to us, the readers.

Here is a poem from Mary Oliver’s Pulitzer-winning volume, *American Primitive* (1983):

May

May, and among the miles of leafing,
blossoms storm out of the darkness—
windflowers and moccasin flowers. The bees

dive into them and I too, to gather
their spiritual honey. Mute and meek, yet theirs
is the deepest certainty that this existence too—
this sense of well-being, the flourishing
of the physical body—rides
near the hub of the miracle that everything
is a part of, is as good
as a poem or a prayer, can also make
luminous any dark place on earth. (53)

What I find interesting about this poem is how it is willing to climb right up to the edge of the abyss, to the edge of a self-annihilating presence, but then chooses to turn away and even to fight back. There, in the second line, is the darkness that results from the “leafing” of trees, from the temporal passage of one season to the next. This is, then, an acknowledgment of transience, of the annihilating force that accompanies each momentary abundance. But the speaker, the I, is not willing to give the scene away so easily; rather, she will war against it, enlisting all the good and genuine specificity she can muster as proof that the scene can and must be kept. Thus, the blossoms, her shining little soldiers, “storm out of the darkness.” But they are not simply blossoms, they are blossoms with names (“windflowers and moccasin flowers”) and these names are what allow the speaker to possess them, to make use of them. Are the actual flower names meaningful in any way? Would it matter, for example, if she had said “strawflowers and bell flowers” instead? Probably not, although the use of “moccasin” may trade on a facile identification with Native Americans. More important, however, than the actual names

of these flowers is the fact that she is able to name them, since naming something is the first step towards owning, controlling and internalizing it; once owned, it can, like that dragonfly, be preserved in a state of suspended animation. By listing the “actual” flowers, they become, in their sudden specificity, irreducible and authentic,³ and these qualities shimmer back and forth between the speaker and the object.

This reciprocity is then made more blatant in the next sentence, in which the speaker likens herself to the bees, except that she gathers “spiritual honey” from the flowers, rather than actual honey. Setting aside the inaccuracy of the metaphor (bees gather pollen, not honey) we can see how the speaker, by making the flowers’ issue holy, attempts to cast the entire process as being beyond the earthly, beyond the temporal. And from this position, the speaker is able, like the bees she keeps, to assert with “deepest certainty” the eternal continuation of the scene’s irreducible presence. “Existence” thus becomes the primary value in the poem—the existence of a scene that *can* be kept. Like a “physical body,” the solidified goodness of the scene becomes part of a “miracle that everything is a part of.” And this scene is “as good as,” or the equivalent of, “a poem or a prayer.”

Here the speaker makes the boldest and cleverest argument yet for the presence of genuine, unmediated expression. Since “this existence,” grounded in the scenic specificity of Oliver’s language, is “as good as a poem,” we are asked to conclude that it is not, itself, the poem. The speaker is insisting that the reader not see the scene as artifice constructed by the speaker through the medium of language, but rather that the scene and

³ The speaker, of course, does not know or does not acknowledge the attending irony—that while naming an object gives it an air of authenticity, the effect is to remove the object to the level of language, of arbitrary construction.

its speaker, whom we have only met through the (constructed) lens of this poem, are and have been *real* and separate from the poem itself. The poem, like a prayer, attempts to serve only as a divine, unmediated *expression* of the pre-existent, genuine realm—a transparent, holy window to the authentic, holy self (consciousness) of the speaker.

Finally, we have reached the place where the specificity of the scene, its *exact description*, overwhelms the darkness that has threatened to destroy it. Whereas at the beginning of the poem the blossoms “storm out” from the darkness, they now return in the company of new recruits—the undivided, coherent “miracle that everything is a part of.” Like crusaders, they set out to convert the darkness, to destroy it in order to reveal in radiant detail the scene which darkness held so long in the hell of indeterminacy. Apparently, then, the darkness is the one thing that is not included in “the miracle that everything is a part of”; it is the other, unspecific and threatening, against which the “luminous,” authentic scene, and its narrator, must struggle. The darkness must be born again. Or, failing that, it must be destroyed.

Oliver’s poem seems to fit nicely into Simic’s definition of the lyric; it is fighting mightily against the notion of transience and in favor of the notion of a discreet, autonomous self. But in order to argue for these positions, Oliver’s poem must radically distort the very principles on which it seems to be built. Clearly, the poem’s medium is language, yet the I of the poem insists that the existence of which she speaks falls outside of language, which merely expresses (exactly) that existence. The poem’s linguistic signs have no autonomy or self-reflexivity in and of themselves; indeed, if the language of the poem were allowed to open up, to direct the reader’s attention to an indeterminate space, this would itself be a denial of the speaker’s authority. Thus, the speaker is careful

to be *very descriptive*, so that there can be no room for doubt, so that the speaker's authority is unquestionable. There can be no "other I's." The community that constructed Oliver's medium is unrecognized, the slippage that necessarily occurs between self and other is dismissed. Instead, we are left with the naïve Romanticism of a pre-Einsteinian, pre-atomic, pre-technological century—nature without teeth. More troubling, we are encouraged to believe in the speaker's ownership of language, which can in turn be made to do whatever she deems necessary for the general good—a philosophical perspective that seems, indeed, more at home in an age of colonialism and manifest destiny.

I have used Oliver's poem as an example of the traditional, and exceedingly common, position taken by lyric poets. Having found this position lacking, it is necessary to ask what is left for the lyric if, in fact, we accept that it is impossible, via language, to a) stand outside the stream of time, and b) express a purely subjective, unmediated consciousness. Do new opportunities move in to fill the void? I would like to suggest a few possibilities, using my own work and the work of others as examples.

As we have seen, the primary failing of the Neo-Romantic lyric is its failure to acknowledge or explore contemporary notions of time, authority and language— notions born out of the very real, often destructive, history of the past century-and-a-half. But if much of what we find pleasurable about the lyric—its meditative quality, its lush attention to detail, its beauty—is married to the form's fidelity to ideas that are no longer tenable, can a beautiful, earnest, meditative lyric still exist? I believe that it can, but that it must exist in an acknowledged context that is not itself a denial of the age in which we live.

For Joe Wenderoth, this acknowledgement is an opportunity to refocus the lyric in the direction of a new kind of beauty:

[O]ne's own self is impossible to keep. One's own self, taken as already there, is . . . bound to being lost to the forever shattering ground of language in which it was founded. I think poetic speech is well defined, then, as the practice of saying good-bye to one's self, and to the place of one's self, which is forever dissolving and forever gone. (31)

Wenderoth's solution to the problem of a de-centered self and setting is not to resist that transience or to give up on the possibility of beauty, but to find that beauty by encouraging a view *into* the dark forces (what he calls "obscenery") that lead to the annihilation of the self. "One might not," says Wenderoth, "so much stop love as turn love into the direction of that dark. Love not the scene, but the obscene, the coming of a scene which can't be kept" (32).

As an example of the kind of lyric Wenderoth is advocating—a lyric in which "the place of one's self" dissolves—I want to look at one of Wenderoth's own poems. "Watching Home Movies" is from Wenderoth's second collection from Wesleyan, *It is if I Speak* (2000). In the poem, a family sets up a movie projector outside. They aim the projector down into a "snakepit," using the floor ("the writhing bottom") as a screen.

At first the projected light was solid—
no image broke it or held it back—
and we could see the screen for what it was,

a deep tangle of unmarried bodies

driven by circumstance to strive and glisten
in their failure to come apart.
We trusted in this failure,
and from within its glistening,
before we knew it, faces emerged,
as if to reward our trust,
and these we recognized,
these we could tease apart and speak of.
And we did, we spoke of them
until we spoke of nothing else,
and in the sound of spoken faces
and nothing else
we drifted into morning
without knowing
what we were actually looking at. (7)

I find this poem to be an attractive example of post-Romantic lyric, primarily as a result of the poem's willingness to acknowledge what Wenderoth calls the obscene—the scene that can't be kept. In the poem, the abstract, undivided light of the initial projection is not “held back” or “broken” by any image. Within this “deep tangle,” it is impossible to distinguish one thing from another. This absence of signification is, in one sense, a “failure,” but it is also something that the viewers can “trust,” perhaps because that which does not signify remains in a permanent state of unexhausted possibility. Soon, however, the movie begins, and the images (faces they recognize) “tease apart” the

abstract, breaking it down into a world of images that can, in turn, be translated into the even more specific world of speech (“spoken faces”). Once this transformation has been fully figured, however, the last three lines of the poem imply that the move from an abstract, pre-linguistic state to a specific, scenic state of language is a move from abundance into loss. Language and imagery do not preserve the scenic ground. Rather, they create a material reality that must then become subject to the temporal forces—the stream of time—that will erode and dissolve that reality. Wenderoth’s speaker does not try to resist or transcend that dissolution. Instead, the loss, and its attending irony, are acknowledged and explored, taken for what they are.

Wenderoth is but one example of a poet who directly explores the ironic limitations of his own medium. In her essay on female lyric poets of the 1980s, Allison M. Cummings points to Susan Mitchell as an example of a poet who forthrightly acknowledges, within her poems, the artificiality of her own medium. In Mitchell’s poems, “self-conscious irony is a hallmark of sincerity.” In many poems, Mitchell “foregrounds unreliable, florid speakers who acknowledge the artifice and insincerity of their medium *in order to* gain credibility” (173). The “floridity” of these speakers is in tune with traditional lyricism, and the poems gain “emotional power” from these lyric tropes. But Mitchell’s “self-conscious reflexivity and sudden deflations of poetic artifice avoid the mystifications of the scenic mode without locating alternative sources of value; they dream eloquently that lyrical wishes could be granted but never forget that they cannot” (172). In this way, Mitchell, like Wenderoth, manages to preserve lyric intensity without giving in to naïve tropes that cannot be honestly maintained.

While Mitchell uses meta-poetic gestures and ironic asides within her poems, thereby foregrounding the poem's artifice, other poets use the form of the poem itself in an effort to acknowledge and explore the mediating influence of language. I am thinking in particular of those poets that use the page in ways that emphasize a constructed, inter-discursive view of language. Take, for example this section from "A Great Noise the World Makes," a poem from Bin Ramke's book, *Wake* (1999):

Reading tells itself that it exists, and thus, it does

In the wet swamp	
palmetto frond	
and French curses when	
the briar surprises against the wrist	<i>Sure enough, thought I, little</i>
or neck the	<i>or perhaps nothing I do know</i>
mosquito laden air	<i>of the nature of those beautiful</i>
the taste of	<i>denizens of the air . . . "Sir,"</i>
	<i>replied I, "I am a student of</i>
listening	<i>Nature, and admire her works,</i>
and	<i>from the noblest figure of man</i>
opening	<i>to the crawling reptile which</i>
of the eye	<i>you have in your bosom."</i>

—Journals

To reconnect; to place the pieces back into original unitary configuration; to return the amputee to prewar wholeness; to heal; to hide the seams of what was once one; to seduce into self. (53-54)

In this excerpt from Ramke's poem, he skillfully blends the lyric observations of the verse (on the left) with a parallel prose excerpt from Audubon's journals, followed by a mock dictionary entry that comments, in part, on the poem's attempted connections. And all of this is preceded by the assertion that "reading," a process, authorizes its own reality independent of the author. By using parallel texts (one original and one quoted) Ramke foregrounds the poem's material construction. Readers cannot move effortlessly down the page, unmindful of the poem's material reality. While this construction complicates the reading process, it also allows the reader to determine how the poem should be read. The author cedes this decision to the reader and to the process of reading, thereby disclaiming a large measure of authorial control. Moreover, by allowing other authors' texts to populate his poem, Ramke highlights the inter-discursive nature of all texts. The objectifying machinery of the poem forces even the first-person speaker in the poem to be seen as a mediated object, a text among other texts, rather than as a pure, transparent source of expression.

This revision of traditional dualisms like subject/object and self/other is central to the formation of a post-Romantic lyric. I argued before that the traditional lyric voice is (or attempts to be) monological and authoritative—a presentation of a genuine self that, in turn, can be pitted against a threatening, indeterminate other. In the poem below,

however, the self/other duality is complicated by a shifting, unstable first-person point-of-view.

The Descent

We thought it was hailing that night. In the morning, we walked outside and saw them. Nobody made a noise about our tendencies toward wishing. My neighbor hid his mouth with a hand. Seeing that is not what makes us a community. The whole night the quilts grew heavier and heavier. We thought it was hailing. Somebody found them in a book. Bohemian Waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus*. The black eye-mask, the terminal band. We thought the heavens were opening up. Five hundred when we finally stopped numbering their dead.

In the morning, we walked outside and saw them. My neighbor crushed a lame one beneath his heel. All night I dreamed I was flying in a cloud. Only the beating of wings told me where I was. I began striking him, and he fell to the ground. That is not what makes us a community. The cloud's blanket kept pushing us lower. We saw the houses and remembered what it was like before we turned from that. Somebody found a book. We were not in the narrative. When the last bag was full, I said we would have to buy more.

When we reached them, they said they had never seen
anything like us.

I should say, first of all, that I did not start out to write this poem *as a model* for some philosophy of poetics. Indeed, it was only after I had written it that I came to understand the ways in which it seemed more *open* than what I had written before. Whereas many of my previous poems assumed a unified self and a definable subject, “The Descent” turns its eye(s) in the direction of its own dissolution. Indeed, that dissolution becomes more and more apparent as the poem progresses, dissolving perspectives, recombining, dissolving again.

At the beginning of the poem, the perspective of the “voice” seems relatively stable—a resident speaking for the residents.⁴ Likewise, the poem seems to be a fairly straightforward re-collection of a past event. This changes slightly with the interference of the third sentence. What “tendency”? Wishing for what? The implication might be that the event has come in conflict with, or is an affirmation of, an unnamed desire. In this indeterminacy, the “obscene” begins to open. The sight itself, the object of the neighbor’s horror, is, like the darkness in Oliver’s poem, as yet undescribed. Thus, it is unclear to what he is reacting, just as we are unsure in the next sentence if the “that” refers to the neighbor’s reaction or to the object of his horror. Here, then, the self/other relationship begins to waver, to become insecure.

Next, the speaker’s relationship to, and control over, time is called into question. Suddenly, the residents are back in bed, the scene beginning again, the poem starting

⁴ Wordsworth: “a man speaking to men”

over, perhaps to try to make better sense? This seems, for a moment, to work. The pieces are starting to come together—"Somebody found them in a book"—because we now know the object of the neighbor's horror. The birds have a name, a genus and species, identifying marks that place them firmly in the known world. Though their appearance seemed otherworldly, as if "the heavens" had opened, we now know the truth, a truth that can be numbered and collected.

From a rhetorical standpoint, the traditional lyric poem might have stopped here, the brief glimpse into the obscene having been conquered by a coherent, identifying assertion of specificity.⁵ In "The Descent," however, the second stanza/paragraph parallels the first, but radically undermines its certainty. Again, we are thrown back in(to) time, but the scene, while similar to that of the first stanza, does not quite match. We are not just learning new information, we are learning information that seems to contradict what we "knew" from the first stanza. The neighbor's horror becomes an ambiguous gesture that might be a show of mercy or of malice; we can't be sure which. Suddenly, the choice does not seem to be speaker's choice, but the reader's.

At this point, the poem begins to open up completely, as the position of the speaker is radically altered. The *I* appears for the first time, but its appearance coincides with the oneiric transfer of personality from agent to object, from the personal to the animal.⁶ And from this point on, all notions of a stable, central self dissolve utterly.

⁵ In his essay in APR, Wenderoth identifies and criticizes this very scenario—man finds dead animal, contemplates annihilation, then perseveres—in William Stafford's poem "Traveling through the Dark."

⁶ This exchange of agency between human and non-human subjects is discussed by Dorothy M. Nielsen in her essay "Ecology, Feminism, and Postmodern Lyric Subjects" (see Jeffreys, 127-49). She explores W.S. Merwin's "paradoxically lyrical postmodernism" (131) concluding that Merwin often "disturbs the line between subject and object by interweaving human and non-human focalizers" (133). By doing so, Merwin

Even when sentences are transcribed *as is* from the first stanza, the language, in true Heraclitean fashion, fails to mean the same thing twice. This time, there can be no exact description, no certain presence in a controlled script. Instead, we are left with an ever-shifting identity, a presence (if it is a presence) that is both alien and familiar, is both *them* and *us*, all in a scene that can't be kept, owned, dominated by a singular point-of-view.

As I said, I did not write this poem as an argument; nevertheless, I believe it may serve as an adequate example of the kind of lyrical stance that leaves room for expression but does not insist so absolutely on its own authority. As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, the difference between the poetry of poets like Oliver and poets whose work challenges traditional lyric assumptions can often be located in “the [degree of] *authority* ascribed to the speaking voice” (*Language Poetry* 18). Oliver’s poem depends on an autotelic perspective that is grounded in notions of timelessness, self-expression, and the ownership of language—perspectives that I find, in this age, untenable. Fortunately, as we have seen, the lyric is a flexible form that persists in every age by dint of its ability to accommodate new poetic notions. Currently, this means that the lyric that wishes to be, at least in part, about itself *as language* must indulge in those “failures” that formally threatened its viability. “Poetic speech,” Wenderoth reminds us, “is not the speech of any specific person or of any specific place. . . . [I]t arises from the faltering of such specificities” (35).

Where we are, then, is not really a place but a process, not a constant state of

calls into question the anthropocentric attitudes that have led to environmental disaster, while at the same time advocating an intersubjective, interdependent view of the self.

being, but of becoming. It is from here, which is really nowhere, that the poem speaks and from here that we listen, perhaps to the voice of an unknowable other, perhaps to our own voice calling back. As the title *Anything Like Us* implies, a recurring theme in the poems is that of a desire for, and a failure to maintain, self-sustaining connections. My hope is that, by way of failure, these poems manage both to call and to respond to that desire.

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The Descent

We thought it was hailing that night. In the morning, we walked outside and saw them. Nobody made a noise about our tendencies toward wishing. My neighbor hid his mouth with a hand. Seeing that is not what makes us a community. All night the quilts grew heavier and heavier. We thought it was hailing. Somebody found them in a book. Bohemian Waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus*. The black eye-mask, the terminal band. We thought the heavens were opening up. Five hundred when we finally stopped numbering their dead.

In the morning, we walked outside and saw them. My neighbor crushed a lame one beneath his heel. All night I had dreamed I was flying in a cloud. Only the beating of wings told me where I was. I began striking him, and he fell to the ground. That is not what makes us a community. The cloud's blanket kept pushing us lower. We saw the houses and remembered what it was like before we turned from that. Somebody found a book. We were not in the narrative. When the last bag was full, I said we would have to buy more. When we reached them, they said they had never seen anything like us.

ONE

Hearse

I.

a word
and I begin
to see

(a field and its farmer
(spring planting
(a bag of seed
(black soil turning beneath the rake
(dew on the horse becoming steam

a fellow he could be
anyone even my own
father is unremarkable
inside the daily weather

he this man and to
his horse he secures
(glinting) the teeth of this
his *herse* his harrow

“the same word which,
in a different group of senses,

[continue stanza]

has now the form HEARSE.”

in a different group of senses
the scene re-corrects
in the ear and eye
this hardy variety

we grow and tend
and here the farmer stops
himself to listen as if
he heard his name

far off the way
my father (eighteen) says
he stopped his own
hard harrowing saw

1941

the bombers plowing
overhead black lines
all one direction he said
he knew the meaning

So here is the part(ing)
wherein the farmer sees
the columns coming
(glinting) across the mead

therefore, exhibit:

II.

The Breach

it could have been anything
and no reason we can see
or sense how it survives
by grim necessity perhaps

*He kembyd his heer wt
an hierche in stede of a
combe.*
—Caxton's trans. of
Ovid

so farmer hustles to
and beneath some banner
with other men makes
ready for the enemy

just here where the(y) mean
defense dissolves a need
to fill that space against
and towards its own absence

a word begins (in place of)
to be—his herse, turned up
to pierce, became *cheval-de-frise*
laid in to lance

cheval-de-frise: a defensive appli-
ance of war, employed chiefly
to stop cavalry charges; by the
18th century it became a name
for the jagged edges of wo-
men's dresses. Thus, in 1753, a
song: *Your neck and your shoulder
both naked should be, Was it not for
Vandyke, blown with chevaux-de-
frize.* A herse to preserve vir-
ginity.

“to incommode the march as well
of the horse, as the infantry.”

—Chambers, *Cycl.*

[new stanza]

to incommode—both tooth
and word that cut themselves
on soil and seed now sink
into the world (made) flesh

and bone the skeleton
of a different sense
plow beaten into sword
and so not just

a keen defense
but soon “a form
of battle array”
three times as deep

as wide the “Hearse
Battell”—W.Barriffe, *Military Discipline*
forms its lines to strike
against the root it can’t recall

III.

Hearse: “a triangular frame somewhat similar in form
to the ancient harrow, designed to carry candles, and
used at the service of *Tenebrae* on Easter Eve.”

Good Friday
my father (forty- five)
black robe and stole
ignites the candle

we will pass from
each to each
a silent liturgy
of heat and light

ties us to what if not
this word this word
whose one sense went
to war whose other

like my father went
in stede to church
to the service and company
of a different sense

[new stanza]

a flame we pass

from each to each

Vas ad aquam benedictam.

Hercia ad tenebras.—Synod of Exeter, 1287

This too has a name

a way of being

Benedictio ignis

blessing of fire

IV.

*By-fore a tombe, that new
was dyghte . . . There-on an
herse, sothely to saye, Wyth
an [hundred] tappers
lyghte.*

—Le Morte de Arthure

this word that went
two ways and came
to rest again inside
the same black space

that claims both
Christ and Christian
could not escape
(like Christ) that tomb

and so became its
ornament: “an elaborate framework originally
intended to carry lighted tapers and other
decorations over the bier or coffin while placed in
the church at funerals.”

container
and contained

*Bold Arches pierces through the
mid-hoast and strewes the way with
hersees.*—Heywood, *Troy*, 1609

[new stanza]

“pall
bier
coffin
vaguely, a tomb, grave. or”

a word to bear
more words:

“The nexte daye his hearse was sett upe . . .
covered with blacke . . . garnyshed
with scogeons and with yelowē pynyons
full of blacke lyons.”

—J. Hooker, *Life of Sir P. Carew*, 1575

V.

black lines move past
the coffin my father
sees it carried to
the hearse whose owner

PAUL BURNS JR., UNDERTAKER
opens the door and asks
my father (seventy)
to step inside

the new custom
Cadillac “fully loaded”
he says and shows how
each passenger controls

his own temperature
and angle of recline
“the standard bearer
of the industry.”

is this then where
a word might go
to spend its own

[continue stanza]

eternity scribing

the cool remove

of each one's own

felicitous atmosphere

death as climate control?

who knows what end

or what corruption

began the breath

that made it first

to break a surface

to make a good thing

grow and then

to break again for want

of life or country

a black lineage

I bend to trace

from seed to husk

and still I cannot

hold it all it breaks again

as if to say this is

the one condition

[new stanza]

we cannot amend or make
 our own except to lie
 inside it once to breathe
 its pooling atmosphere

until that too is ours
 and claims us
 like a remnant acre
 where I imagine still

my father not yet
 in heaven he stops
 his harrowing, sky-eyed
 and then begins to run

beneath the lines
 that score this scene
 a grand staff
 whose music drowns him

(always) out, my father
 so small against that
 ceaseless furrowing
 I see his mouth

but cannot hear

[continue stanza]

for all the world
his urgent voice
that word he keeps repeating

Two

Marigolds

So hard to recall an actual beginning. The crow coughed and I cracked an eye? Or the auditory illusion that calls itself “crow” hailed my flagging unconscious like a cab, the crippled driver motioning back with a flick of the chin? So hard to recall an actual thought. Someone called for rain. Spirit, crow, if you're the weatherman too, who's driving this thing? Did I crack an eye? It is hard to recall. Only faith dictates my marigolds be dead beneath the bedroom window. If I checked I would know this was not the beginning.

Ham-fisted, bent against the gathering wind, my brawling good intentions just precede me, bushwhacking, bloodied shins against the bramblewhips and broken glass of *next*. Without them, I would have no beginning. No. I would, only somewhere else, perhaps behind, sunk with the weight of poor conscience. Or here, where a crow taps the window: *tap-tap, tap-tap*. I crack an eye. Crow hops from foot to foot. I waggle my toes. Crow giggles like a schoolgirl. I bang my fist against the window. Crow curls himself into the shape of an ear. I open the window and bring it inside. I hold it to my own and realize it is my ear, the ear I was missing all along.

“Little ear, good ear,” I say, stroking its blue-black feathers.

“You are like a god to me,” the ear whispers.

How Memory Works

One giant slab of morning light
crashes down the narrow street
like a whale struck in a shipping lane.

The scientists come wearing rubber gloves
and hip waders. They heave it onto the sidewalk
and have at it with their dull gray instruments.

Soon, its organs are spilled across the ground
like Gettysburg's dead. They slice open
the stomach and find everything

the light consumed: the white tablecloth
bruised with wine, the two a.m. feeding,
the knife and the gun, brown nut of sleep

cracked open, bowed heads of flowers,
still fragrant, asleep in their beds.
By the time I arrive almost nothing is left.

Every article of interest has been carted away
to far-off labs for further study. So I go, without
thinking even to touch its dim remainders,

[new stanza]

lying there on the concrete like twilight—
not thinking until now, two weeks hence,
standing here in the pre-dawn rain,

I look down and spy something
glinting off my black boots
like a tiny flower of daylight,

which it is.

Chopin

Our downstairs neighbor, blind as old, plays ramshackle Chopin on a three-quarters grand. Night after night, *The Revolutionary Etude* dances a two-step with a one-legged sailor. “In the dead of winter,” says Carlotta, “he walked to Krakow—thirty miles with rags on his feet just to hear Pederewski play,” a lie I’ve grown fond of over the years. When he hits the home stretch I usually offer to go buy us the best cheese you can fit in a handkerchief. But tonight something’s different. He’s playing out of his mind. “He’s confused an etude with a fire,” cries Carlotta. Sure enough, the music creeps through the floorboards like smoke, curls around our ankles, slides its fingers up our pants. I put my hand to the floor, feel the warmth rising there. “Look!” I say, and show her the small flame dancing in my palm. She says, “Quick you have to name it” and wraps her thighs around my waist. “I will call it Helmut,” I say as I remove her blouse. “Helmut, czar of one-legged sailors. Helmut, little king of all flesh.”

Carlotta's Fire

She loves me as a terrorist loves his blasting caps, an unsentimental fanaticism. “You see, your childhood was a metal bowl full of microwaveable spiders” was a dumb thing for me to say. She never takes her eyes off the road I do not recognize. Strange animals flare the shoulder. Headlights flicker. The engine's only song is a smash hit—number ten on the charts, with a bullet.

Carlotta, you are a handshake from crazy. Do you remember the wide, straight streets of Omaha? We were the king and queen of our postal code. The wheat fields grew fat on our summer doorstep, laid down like dogs in the long afternoon. Carlotta, you are a hound's tooth from homicide. The insects hum to themselves before they risk a note inside your night.

Where we end up smacks of where we started, save for the tiny airport lights that bring the model planes in safe. She says, “I love this place. It reminds me of a hammerlock Emperor Penguin gave the Loggerhead Shrike on one of those late-night wrestling shows.” I can't argue with that while sidestepping the miniature firemen. I'm hoping she doesn't notice how lazy and disorganized they are, but I can already see the tears welling up behind her eyes.

“All I want is a little beauty,” she cries, and strikes a match.

The Natural World

There is not, for example,
a spoon large enough
to unionize its individual molecules.
What chance would they have anyway
in the new world disorder?

Even the frost that used to hide
the moon's cold indiscretions
has left our windows bare.
This is forever: television
makes love to your firstborn son

immoderately. How, you ask,
could this happen here?
My friend, walk in the woods at dusk
and see everywhere the gallows
locked inside the whims of trees.

Sixty Second Spot

Screaming advertises the enunciated whisper,
as my wife's fingers advertise the numbers on a watch.
Eat well is an advertisement for mercy,
and our bloated toad Henry, god bless him,
is an advertisement for loss.

Myself, I am an ad for not falling asleep
with your mouth full of orange slices.
Lucky for me I'm tight with old Apollo,
himself humbled by an overlong mustard cravat
and rumpled muleskin overcoat. Each morning
the incessant tapping and smell of boiled oatmeal.
Apollo, talking up the benefits of an efficient urethra.

Before him, my mother's former alarm clock.
Before that, the placental burp, a subliminal pitch
for the latest button nose and ambidexterity, all
the rage of 1969. Which brings me back to nothing
but these orange slices, the gummy ones, bravely orange,
themselves a sunny ad for my failed mortality,
my ill-gotten heart, my toothy, toothy grin.

The Death of Cleopatra

Where does her cat wander off to at night? He returns to the sweet milk of his opium past, where nothing happens beneath the low buzz of the stars and the weather on his tongue surrounds a landscape of salt.

The grave markers hung with phosphorescent stars come at once to the plastic forest. The birds give up their dead into the arms of each stone's religion. Somewhere, the owl flexes her claws and the night begins to fill its stomach, at dawn will use its one dull spoon to clean last scraps from a fading bowl.

Beneath the canopy of vines where clouds come to relax on holiday, prayers for rain recite themselves from a book. Smoke moves from the wood to the palace, past the sleeping guards, and coils itself around the pretty girls' ankles.

Cleopatra wakes.

Cleopatra I'm the candle your death must ignite to free its sleep. Cleopatra as the rains return to you the stones grind themselves to moondust. Cleopatra I'm the amorous smoke with the delicate longing. Already your sleek animals come forth with ivory bowls and each attending spice.

I corrupt your headpiece and jewels, your black hair turns white as cocaine, one breast calculates the demise of the other. Death

tongues his way up your leg slowly, an occluded front. They are equipping the tomb with closed-circuit wailing, they've tapped arsenic onto the tails of your cats. Ten phases of the moon have been obtained and sequestered. The first hour of your death, Cleopatra, will be our first hour.

Lucky Day

There is a cat who picks stocks
with his paw of terrible forethought.
Or you're perfectly human
and can't stop thinking
like a cat. How nice the sun feels
streaming through the window mornings.
You would like nothing more
than to eat a good breakfast,
go back to sleep for awhile,
then eat a good breakfast.
Did I mention this cat is a millionaire?
You might be rich too if you were orange,
if your eyes were more human.
You *can* play with the electric mouse.
But alas, the new cat toys are all about loss.
In this way, they resemble the old cat toys.
Then your wife calls to you, asking
for a quarter. You reach into your pocket,
pluck it out with nimble fingers.
Then you reach into your pocket again,
just because you can.

Fiddler on the Roof

Nothing so perfect as a perfect line and nothing so elusive. A breath of wind can distract even the most devoted bullet. As I cut the birthday cake it begins to weep, no, I begin to weep. I had envisioned each piece, a perfect symmetry like one finds in military parades, except the bright sun causes a fit of sneezing. The audience is horrified, not to mention the czar. My hand wavers and the knife, blind by design, is left to find its own path. The line at the show becomes unruly. Someone throws a bowl of borscht. The line at the Jewish wedding separates the men from the women, but it develops a kink during a bout of heavy thinking. Now the bespectacled scrivener stands in the breach and forgets wherefore, not to mention whom. "Am I man or woman?" he cries, but nobody can answer. In the script he has no lines. The audience is horrified. The cast members take turns burning him with their white-hot eyes.

Lysippan Proportions

At all times I carry a pin in my pocket, a charm and a reminder of the world's cruel deal with itself. I too have a tiny head, which makes me seem eight feet tall. To support myself, I'm translating a lost Viking epic, but who reads them anymore, even when these Vikings have bad drug habits and give each other high-fives after sacking Normandy. At last, someone slips a note beneath my closet door. *Come hither with your flasket of guts.* Peculiar. But the day is looming heavy with castoff bird feathers. I can't even see across the street to the dry goods emporium, to the maker of hammers: *tack, rubber, ball-peen, claw.* Then I'm outside running because it's under me, closing on me like a poisonous lily, like a corset of bees. I run past the darkened shop windows: *tackrubberballpeenclaw.* Past the careless pastry chef licking his white fingers unaware. Also, I have no shoes. Perfectly thirsty, I am a translator of Viking epics. It eats me. Me and my brand-new pants, the French ones without any pockets.

In an Occupied Land

No revolution here. No matter
the gunshots ringing out each night
inside your eyes, the nerve-net fouled
by a bad dream or two. Your lungs
hang out on street corners all day
smoking cheap cigars. It's okay,
they assure you, this is our job, really.
The hip-bone marries the thigh-bone,
they give birth to three sad knuckles
and the bone of contention.
In the narrowing corridors
of your last best artery, your blood
sells secrets for nickels
to buy you a grave. Truly,
what has already happened
was for your own good.
Don't trouble yourself
with what comes next—
your heart sitting cross-legged
at the foot of a tree with its empty bowl,
that bottle of port it's been saving
it seems like forever.

THREE

Notes for an Invitation

Come in. You know the place.
See where you've stained
the tablecloth with the beets
your mother made for you.
They tasted good, and for this alone
you can love her a little.

Here is your body, broken-
in just for you. Walk around.
Don't worry, you are able
to do this even in the dark
without falling.

And in this place you have
a sister. She was not born
yesterday. Therefore, she has purchased
a pair of pants on sale, then taken them in
to fit your waist. You are pleased
to think she will not die by suicide or love
herself too much, etc. Still,

some days you carry sadness
like a small stone hidden beneath your tongue.
There was the time you saw a birth

[continue stanza]

on television. So much more blood than you
expected, and for this child the world
was merely terrifying—this new world
where the simple opening of a mouth
might mean both screaming and breathing.

The Rumor Mill

Shut doors not quite shut. The vents.
The circulating air. The sign above
the window reads *We Never Close*.
Therefore, this vast blast furnace
with the great glass doors.
The better to witness the burning.

So many tiny, box-like rooms,
each with a tiny desk, a tiny version
of the self. The mad composer peeking
through the door at his cheating heart.
The sharp-eyed boy secretly admiring
his own entrepreneurial spirit.

On the fourteenth floor:
the lone cleaning lady stops
to rest. The broom without bristles.
No wastebaskets here. What, then, to do
with all the wasted paper, the human hair
and limbs? One pocket of her dress
she fills with seeds. The other
is ripe with birds

The Samson Chronicles

Samson is coming. Samson is coming up the hill with the jawbone of an ass and you know what comes next. What comes next is the ceremonial handing over of all prosthetics. This is not without pain. If it snaps on it may not just snap off. Your kneecaps are not forever.

Samson is not so bad after all. He uses that bone of his to stir sugar into his black currant tea. And the ass had a donor card. Moreover, he is a pre-tribulationist. There is more to come. Therefore, do not linger in the bathroom. Neither shall you abandon your office position. There is more to come.

Samson is a killer, don't get me wrong. But he gives me back my hands. I applaud the measure. I have friends who wear raincoats to hide their spare legs. When it's raining, you'd never suspect.

Occasional Hats

I.

There's a party tonight for the Society of Poets and Various Oddities. Therefore, I've created this hat from a dream I had. Enough to say it involves tomatoes and the box from my mail-order lobotomy kit. Don't believe it's a small hat seldom noticed by passersby. That would be a terrible lie foisted upon the American people. Enough to say it's a sizable hat, an occasional hat in the same way a train conductor's hat is occasional: you wouldn't mind him wearing it on the train, but it would seem very out of place at the Pentagon. Believe me, you would have cause to worry if our government officials came to work wearing train conductors' hats. There wouldn't be enough room in the dining car, for one thing.

II.

Last year's party was very messy. We each took turns wiping the drool from its giant chin while it asked us terrific questions, like "Where is the song of the drowned fisherman?" and "Will I ever be as sad as Jesus was?" To which I replied, "Oh Party, you should not worry about that. Religion has broken your heart, that's all." And after that we were free to dance without looking at our feet and the punch was red and it stained our tongues and our lips and our chins. I remember spilling all over my shirt and leaping up on a couch to scream, "I've been shot by any number of ruthless assassins!" But no one could believe in a thing like that.

[continued]

III.

One of the poets at the party will be the great Zibrooshka. She is very famous in certain circles and has many secrets sewn into the folds of her dress. Last year she unveiled a poem called "Courtship Displays of the Blue-Footed Booby in Search of a New-Fangled Heart." That was a great poem because it sounds stupid but actually it was weird in the best sense of that word. The part I remember was the last two lines: "one thousand white feathers adrift on the sea / the earth is a cup of flowers." Which reminds me of a Chinese poem or looking down on a sea of Chinese hats in a square one June afternoon. There were so many hats I had to laugh, though the occasion was serious. And everyone at the party scowled at me because the poem was supposed to be sad.

IV.

By now you may have guessed that I own a shirt called "Lives of the Presidents and Some Great Unitarians." It's a very busy piece of work, what with all the tiny hand-painted portraits and corresponding text. The best and saddest part is when Franklin Pierce weeps for the loss of his only son, who was killed in a train wreck, and Mrs. Pierce decides she cannot bear to entertain the distinguished French diplomat Jacques Hocquard. I would wear my shirt to the party tonight if it weren't for its brief but scathing analysis of the Teapot Dome scandal. You know how poets feel about that! And of course there's the death of Emerson. A good party concentrates on the living. So instead, I will don my Gay Apparel, which has several mesmerizing tricks up its sleeves but no mention of government. When they pass out the toast and

executive pajamas, I'll say *thank you* and step back into my corner without the merest mention of the Supreme Court or its latest landmark decision.

Mortuary Fish

The mortician's boy is a genius
with a football underneath his arm.
He's got that shimmy in his hips,
can freeze a linebacker just like that,
as he slides by into the open field
that stretches out before him,
empty and uncluttered
as the morning table.

Dad has never missed a snap, is proud
to tell you so. Come Friday night,
he turns off all the lights,
locks the large oak doors, then walks
the five blocks toward the orange glow
that pulses above the field, above the cries
that arc through the night,
aimless as errant passes.

In the darkened basement,
his instruments begin the hard task
of forgetting. Slow fish burrow
the outlines of their tank.
The only lights are the dull,
unblinking lights
just behind their eyes.

The Poet (mid-career)

Against life's alluvial sediment,
or a middle way poured of blunt excess,
against a renewal of beautiful sympathy
for unkempt girls, or a failure

of bright trumpets, I set myself.
These generosityes I searched for once
in a market, in a fury, breathing underwater
just to prove no fear of dying.

A little inhuman dance to please
the waitresses in hell. This is the way
my poetry deplaned, with a tiny feather plume
on its cowboy hat, mostly sober

between ten and two. In those days
even the dusky hatefulness of bank tellers
could not make one poem
examine its shoes. The shade beneath

my butterfly net was enough for them.
They didn't eat much. Little poems,
I remember you as if you were
yesterday, and fondly too, though I know

[new stanza]

of the suicides you practiced in the dark
when you thought no one saw you.

An unhealthy desire for a dramatic end,
the doctors said. It's okay, I used to feel

the same. Nowadays, my poems
have learned to relax, have a little more
wine, lean slowly into the white space
of a page, blackened without end.

From the Stamp Collection of P. Monk

#72 is the Archduke of the Grand Duchy of etc. a quite noble chin and one wispy lock of brown hair curling round his ear which is pink as if he just stepped in from a ride on his donkey which he rode through the snow to the cottage of the artist Borodov who noticed the light clinging there on the side of his head and so put it down and we know this because we stayed in the Archduke's palace the four of us crammed in his bed with our feet sticking out listening to the tour guide who chain-smoked and belched the national song and didn't mind if he did have a bit of our cheese thank you very much this is not on the stamp.

Dancing with the Rack

At first it was nothing more than a flash—a small breast cupped in his hand as he reached for the salt—the ability to touch what was once forbidden: innate promise of a lengthening. He could not notice what was growing there.

At night he dreamed of the young widow next door, who once left the house naked, but singing. Now his hands are torture wheels. He can't tell where his arms leave off and the rack begins. And he's given up wondering what could cause a man to sprout from his body the medieval instrument of his own worst suffering.

Instead, to cope, he's learned the tango—the labored movements back and forth, cheek to cheek with his dancing mate. Sometimes he thinks it feels all right. Sometimes when the screaming begins, he hears music.

Parable of the Box

A young boy makes a crude box out of wood scraps. He brings it to the beach and forgets about it while chasing a gull. He grows up with a mysterious fear of birds.

Now other men arrive with their own boxes. They place them around the boy's box. They build homes on the outskirts of the boxes. They make love in the dim light of the moon reflecting off the boxes. Sometimes they argue about the box's origins. Was all matter the product of the box? If so, then what created the matter of which the box consists?

Then one day the boy returns, though he is very old. He bends to retrieve the box but is attacked and killed by birds.

A Few Notes on the Poem to Follow

- A mandrill is a large, ferocious-looking baboon.
- My grandmother taught the corkscrew to President Harding.
- When I say, “He moved minutely into ownership of a pincer,” you should be slightly aroused and slightly repulsed, if those aren't the same for you already.
- Mr. Harding suffered from migraine headaches, which he called his “whackers.”
- “Miracle drug” is roughly equivalent to “wonder drug.”
- “Passerine” is a bird.
- “Passuel” is a dance.
- Did I mention the scary baboon?

Tooly's Regards

When the postcard arrives I take a minute to closely examine the white horse, the black wooden carriage, the hayrack upstage left, heavy with its labor. So that's how you live now, Tooly, who left so many years ago without warning. And how do I know it is you, since the postcard bears only this photograph and my address, written in a careful hand?

Because, Tooly, the carriage is a funeral carriage. Because rain gathers in the clouds, which boil on the horizon, and the hay will be ruined, that is easy to see. It will rot and its mice will gather up their young, return to the wide fields out of which they first were lifted, helpless as the grass they left behind.

FOUR

In the Canyon of Forgotten Makers

i.

we pilot the little house
call it the death of weather

from here is an invitation
to pointing
a way of seeing outside
our lives incessantly

from here we observe
the vast array of obscenities
painted and/or incised
on the general landscape

most were manufactured
therefore
will not desire or have
the fragile bone structure
we look for in say
a champion racehorse

the obscene never fails to re-
form because language is

[continue stanza]

a selective forgetting
knowing one thing
repeatedly
until it seems true

a body a body

of these people and events
one might suspect
they only love
what keeps them

ii.

any arrangement

is philosophical

not simply

a beautiful collection

is not a discreet symmetry

the foundation

for responsible government

green lawn and cul-de-sac

each bright selection balances

in the eye

sparrow

flower

plum

we signed for them this morning

we can sign for most anything

iii.

we love our little house
 how hard
it works for us
 criss-crossing
the frozen lake
 of daylight only answering
to our singular whistle

we make a show of gasping
 each morning
the bay window kicks open
 a nest of bright children
 impossibly lit

so we must steer another way
 must keep looking out
 for something
that does not anticipate us

iv.

everything anticipates us

these chairs
made themselves
to bear a weight our bodies
only now
come into
the house
pushes
tomorrow in front of it
a parcel of hours
wrapped
in the drowned light of possibility
stopping not stopping
the obscene manuscript of
this voyage and telling
this voyage and telling
itself become both
history and harbinger
gate and keeper

v.

we know everything
too soon

like an aborted Christmas
we squeal appearances

our house among houses
moves slowly along
the city planning

each streetlamp spits
a little light a little rain
the ornamental shade
trees calling out
for a name

someone will inscribe them
someone always does

vi.

when finally
we cross the river
 swirling
 black in the eyes
 of the pale-faced ferryman
arrive at the place that calls itself

HERE

 and the little house
 grinds to a halt
in the concrete
 light of evening

we swallow the word
 we did not know
 we wished

 outside
wading waist-deep into the shadows
 of the abandoned city
 its air becomes us

in our mouths

[continue stanza]

the word begins ticking
a clock keeping time
in small measure

vii.

in small measure
 an hour is never
out of breath

 in its own light
the word breeds the city greens
 to our touch

on the high roof garden
 a moonflower sorts the dark
 for water and light
becomes a language we thought
 died long ago
without wishing
 and a name
runs quick fingers
 through the hair
 of its own dear presence

viii.

we call our names

the lost city calls back

we keep calling

until it seems we

first were called

that the city gave to us

our voices

scooped out

and polished

wooden bowls

in the city

each barren surface speaks

its own unbroken dialect

from one voice a thousand echoes

bloom

polyphonic flowers

a chorus chanting

not to us who are we

but each to each (our name)

the simplest of liturgies

call and response

question and answer

the same

ix.

it is hard now
to remember the little house
whose walls once kept us
bright and numbered

it is hard now
to remember our bodies
whose limbs were made only
for care and feeding

so we wander in the echo
chamber of our one voice
our thousand tongues

in the lost city
of good neighbors
without government or angels

in the canyon of forgotten makers
the starfall of our one name
our lamp and our witness

may its light refuse our surface
our cold division of air

[new stanza]

may our carol be not flesh
but the silence of flesh

may we find our one birth
in the hollow bell of this calling